

Blame the messenger

By [James Sledge](#)

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It has not happened all that often, but on occasions someone has been upset enough with a sermon I've preached to call me up and complain. Now I've certainly preached my share of bad sermons, and no doubt I've interpreted a passage of Scripture in a manner that was not justified. But on those occasions when someone has been really agitated, their upset seemed not to be about such things.

I once preached a sermon on the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector from Luke 18. That parable contrasts a Pharisee who tries very hard to do all the God expects of him (and seems rather proud of it) with a tax collector who cannot even bring himself to raise his eyes toward heaven. He simply beats his breast and pleads, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" Jesus says it is the tax collector who left the Temple in good stead with God. My sermon simply retold the parable with the characters updated to our time: a good, faithful (and proud) church goer compared with examples of people who might be considered reprobates in our day.

The next day I had a member call me, and he was irate. "Don't you realize that it is good church people who pay their pledges that keep the church going?" He caught me quite off guard, and to be honest, I don't really recall how I responded to him.

In retrospect, and following a couple of similar episodes over 15 years, I've concluded that these people were not really upset with me -- although I doubt they would admit as much. They were upset with what Jesus or Paul or some prophet had said, but directing their anger at me was much less problematic than being angry with Jesus, Paul, or the prophets.

At least I have a biblical text to shield me. The prophet Amos is on his own. Only his call from Yahweh legitimizes his words of judgment against the northern kingdom of Israel and its rulers. And so it is no surprise that those in power blame the messenger. The priest of the Temple orders Amos to leave. He may not speak at Bethel, "for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom."

In a time when many people do not read their Bibles with much regularity, preaching becomes the context in which the Bible is most often heard. And I fear this leads to the message being too tied to that messenger in the pulpit. And since it's only the preacher, we are free to agree or disagree, even to be angry and upset with her or him. But if the only valid message is the one we already agree with, what power does the Word have to transform us and create us into something new?

O God, speak to us. Help us look beyond the messenger, and hear your Word.

Originally posted at [Pastor James](#)